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SUBJECT: BRUNEI'S REACTION TO 2009 TIP REPORT

SUMMARY

1.(SBU)Starting on June 18,2009, Bruneian media began coverage of the Department's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) 2009 report. Front page coverage, as well as subsequent follow up articles, continued throughout June. Particular attention was paid to the issue of domestic servant abuse and forced labor. On June 28, Brunei's Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) issued a press release, stressing there is "No Human Trafficking in Brunei" and insisted that Brunei is not a hub for recruitment of men and women for domestic or low-skilled labor. This has been the only formal response from the Government of Brunei (GoB). However, in July, the International Organization Department at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade (MFAT) approached and met with Embassy officials to discuss how their office can be of assistance in addressing the issues raised in the report. MFAT is currently working with the Department of Labor and other GoB agencies about legal and procedural changes that can be made to improve Brunei's labor standards, enforcement, and victim assistance. End Summary

FORCED LABOR: REACTION

2.(SBU)On June 18, 2009, the two leading local English language papers gave front page coverage to the State Department's 2009 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report. Local bloggers including the popular "Bruneiresource" and "Lifestyle" blogs also reported on TIP. Throughout the remainder of June, the report generated articles in local papers and feedback on the popular Brudirect "Have No Fear, Have Your Say" online forum. One expatriate columnist, David R Smith, wrote an op-ed and claimed; "one only has to drive around Brunei to see foreign workers living in ramshackle corrugated iron shed with little or no access to running water." However, Smith did not state that foreign workers were suffering from direct abuse within the workplace or from employers. Another columnist, Azlan Othman from Borneo Bulletin, said; "Employers and foreign workers have mixed reactions on the issue of days off, with employers being concerned their maids would get into a wrong company on their off days while foreign workers welcome the move." On June 24, a prominent Bruneian employment agency, Amal Lee Manpower, told the Brunei Times that "employment agencies are blameless for helpers' plight." Amal said that employment agencies are simply responsible for the work permit paperwork, application insurance, travel arrangements, and medical screening. Amal did state that domestic helpers would have to settle any fees owed to their agents here and in their home country.

GoB OFFICIALLY SAYS LITTLE ABOUT TIP REPORT

3.(SBU)On June 25, 2009, ten days after the release of TIP Report, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA) - responsible for labor and immigration issues - issued a press release, responding to the flurry of articles and comments made by the public. The press release stated that the TIP report was not produced by the United Nations or other international organizations. In addition, trafficking was not an issue in Brunei as there was not "one

reported case" during the past year. The MoHA also stated that employment regulations are enforced and that complaints are investigated. This is the first time the GoB has given an official response to the TIP Report. This was also the only official response provided by the GoB. There was no official notification or follow up requests made to the embassy following the report's release.

HOWEVER, MFAT WANTS TO HELP

4.(SBU)On July 13, 2009, Charg and Political Assistant met with Ms. Florence Chong, Director of the International Organization, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT). Florence was accompanied by Princess Mansurah, the daughter of Prince Mohammad, Brunei's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Ms. Chong said MFAT was shocked and unsatisfied to find Brunei's ranked as a Tier 2 country, especially since Brunei was not ranked in previous reports.

However, MFAT did not lodge an official complaint or otherwise indicate this opinion would be released to the public. Charg noted the changes in the TIP legislation were one of the reasons why Brunei was included and ranked in this year's report. In addition, the concerns regarding forced labor and the large numbers of immigrant workers were also discussed. Ms. Chong noted that the MFAT is working with different GoB agencies, especially the Labor Department. She said that the GoB would like to address concerns raised in the report, especially in regards to victim assistance and improved labor regulations and standards. Ms. Chong noted that the MFAT will play an active role in coordinating GoB actions in regard to the TIP report because senior MFAT officials were very concerned about Brunei's ranking in the report.

COMMENT

15. (SBU) The release of TIP report opened up a dialogue among the Bruneian public. Many expressed their concerns in online public forums or in the local print media. They are not afraid to say there is room for improvement, especially in the laws and regulations to prevent foreign worker exploitation. A public awareness campaign would be of great assistance in educating the public on what the GoB is doing to prevent trafficking and assist victims. Initially, the GoB viewed TIP as an issue that only involves prostitution. However, after discussions with Embassy officials and better understanding of the TIP report and legislation, there is a better understanding that trafficking also involves forced labor and exploitation of foreign workers and domestic helpers. The increased involvement of the MFAT will lend additional clout to the efforts of various GoB agencies to improve legislation, increase enforcement, and enhance victim assistance.

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